

The logo for the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse is a square with a colorful, abstract geometric pattern of triangles in shades of blue, purple, and green. The text is white and positioned in the lower-left corner of the square.

**Centre of  
expertise  
on child  
sexual abuse**

# **Child sexual exploitation perpetrators research programme briefing**

**February 2018**

## Introduction

This briefing reflects on the learning from a series of five scoping studies commissioned by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (the Centre) concerning perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (CSE),<sup>1</sup> and sets out how the Centre's next steps will build on this work.

The Centre has been established to help bring about significant and system-wide change in how child sexual abuse is responded to locally and nationally.

We do this by identifying, generating and sharing high-quality evidence of what works to prevent and tackle child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation), to inform both policy and practice.

The Centre recognises, along with many others in the field, that in order to be successful in preventing child sexual abuse from happening, and protecting children who are experiencing abuse, we must develop a better understanding of perpetrators and perpetration.

Child sexual exploitation is a relatively recently recognised and understood form of child sexual abuse, and as such there is a lack of research, in the UK and internationally. This is particularly the case when considering perpetration and perpetrators; the evidence across these aspects of child sexual exploitation is sparse, findings are equivocal and research is generally limited by methodological weaknesses.

The purpose of these exploratory studies is to increase our understanding of CSE perpetration and perpetrators and identify the strengths and limitations of research approaches. The findings will inform both focus and methodology of further much needed research.

The studies vary in their approach, including: identifying findings from research to date, undertaking interviews with experts and, in some cases, case file analysis, new empirical evidence on the characteristics and perspectives of individuals who sexually exploit young people.

## The studies are:

1. *Young people who engage in child sexual exploitation behaviours: An exploratory study*  
Simon Hackett, Durham University and Stephen Smith, Durham Constabulary
2. *Characteristics and motivations of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation: A rapid evidence assessment of research*  
Kate Walker, Claire Pillinger and Sarah Brown, Coventry University
3. *Characteristics and perspectives of adults who have sexually exploited children: Scoping research*  
Kate Walker, Claire Pillinger and Sarah Brown, Coventry University
4. *Interventions for perpetrators of child sexual exploitation: A scoping study*  
Caroline Drummond and Jessica Southgate, Nacro
5. *Interventions for perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation: A scoping review and gap analysis*  
Derek Perkins, Royal Holloway University of London, Hannah Merdian, University of Lincoln, Britta Schumacher, Maastricht University, Hannah Bradshaw, University of Lincoln, Jelena Stevanovic, Maastricht University

The small-scale empirical studies aimed to explore approaches and methods that could be useful in learning more about this group of perpetrators (Hackett and Smith; Walker et al 3) and also provide some significant insights which merit further exploration with larger samples. The studies collecting expert views on interventions aimed to scope out the field and clarify areas of consensus and challenge (Drummond and Southgate; Perkins et al).

<sup>1</sup>A note on terminology. In summarising the reports we have used the term 'perpetrator', as the focus of these studies was upon the individuals who have perpetrated abuse against children. The Centre is aware of ongoing debate about the terminology used to describe those who perpetrate sexual abuse against children, and the impact of labels on individuals' sense of self and capacity to change their behaviours. There is also concern that the 'othering' involved in use of certain labels can diminish capacity to identify risk. Throughout these five reports there is some variation in the terminology used to describe those who perpetrate sexual abuse against children. Terminology is particularly questioned when the abuse is perpetrated by other children and young people.

## Learning from the studies

The five studies provide rich and valuable analysis. The existing literature is very limited and our new empirical findings are based on small, non-probability samples (18 and 14 cases) from which it is not appropriate to generalise. Therefore we have not attempted here to synthesise findings across the tranche of work. Each report includes a summary, with implications and recommendations drawn out.

There are a number of findings, emerging across the studies, that are important to take into account when considering the focus and methodological approach of future research into perpetration and perpetrators of both child sexual exploitation and wider child sexual abuse.

- ▶ Understanding child sexual exploitation is complex. Across the studies it was evident that there was no shared approach in any setting to distinguishing CSE perpetration from CSA. This has implications for research, as well as for policy and service responses. Identification issues were especially important because we were relying on tacit knowledge of agencies when trying to identify individuals to study.

There are a variety of reasons for this confusion, including that:

- the definition of CSE in the published research literature is inconsistent
- inconsistent and varying interpretations of CSE definition are used in practice by a range of professionals, including: police, prison, probation and treatment providers
- CSE can occur across many types of sexual offences which are not specific to CSE
- online and offline spaces are not clearly distinguishable; child sexual exploitation can start online and move offline
- there are challenges in clearly and meaningfully describing and understanding young people's behaviour in terms of CSE and harmful sexual behaviour.
- ▶ In contrast to the wider research base for harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in childhood and adolescence, there is little in the literature specifically on the topic of young people who engage in sexually exploitative behaviours.

- ▶ Where research evidence exists, it is largely directed at online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), which limits generalisability to other contexts.
- ▶ Effective sampling within empirical studies in this area is challenging. Sampling and recruiting to studies involving perpetrators is dependent upon gatekeepers and consent from the individuals to engage. Combined with the restricted scale and timeframe, this has resulted in the samples being limited in their diversity and not including individuals involved in group offending.
- ▶ Evidence for the effectiveness of interventions is sparse or contested, as:
  - what constitutes effectiveness is subject to debate among experts
  - comparisons between groups of sexual offenders or with other offender or non-offender control groups are lacking
  - practitioners say they feel overwhelmed, both by the scale of offending and because they are working without an adequate research base to support their practice.
- ▶ It is clear that there are very few interventions – in prison, probation or the community – for individuals convicted of CSE-related offences.

These studies reinforce our earlier finding, in the Centre's study of [gaps in the knowledge base](#), that many questions remain unanswered.

## Next steps

It is vital that we gain a better understanding of CSE and wider CSA perpetration and its place within understandings of wider sexual offending. This is necessary to support effective policy-making, and wider discussions about how to improve capacity to prevent abuse from happening and protect children when it is taking place.

These studies were commissioned as scoping research to inform further work. The Centre's forward work programme has been informed by these insights and challenges. Key activities are outlined on the next page.

## Developing a new typology of CSA offending

The issue of defining perpetration and perpetrators of CSE (within the wider category of CSA) is a recurring challenge across the studies, and the Centre recognises this issue in practice across a range of agencies.

Based on the experience of this group of studies, our next research programme focuses on CSA as a whole, seeking to clarify what are the key factors, contexts and dynamics that distinguish different types of perpetration, both by young people and by adults. The Centre is commissioning the development, testing and wider application of a typology of CSA offending based on new qualitative research, taking a fresh look at data held in police and other agencies' records.

We anticipate this research will support:

- ▶ the adoption of more consistent and holistic understandings of CSA offending
- ▶ the exploration of improved approaches to data collection in relation to offending and offenders
- ▶ the advancement of understanding of offending pathways, the enablers of offending and the contexts in which offending occurs
- ▶ an improved ability to identify cohorts for further research.

Ultimately the achievement of each of these outcomes will support the development of more effective disruption and intervention efforts.

## Perpetration and perpetrators research implications and focus workshops

In the spring we will convene two days of workshops to consider the focus of further research and the methodological approaches that can be used to overcome some of the challenges with research in this field.

The workshops will bring together academics, practitioners and researchers working in the field of perpetration of child sexual abuse with policy-makers, to share experience and to identify barriers and possible solutions to effective research.

## Key messages from research

Our '[Key messages from research](#)' series brings together current research on child sexual exploitation with implications for practice and strategic commissioning. The aim of this series is to increase professionals' confidence in taking appropriate action based on the best current research evidence. Each 'Key message' looks at understanding what child sexual exploitation is, and at best practice in supporting young people, disrupting and prosecuting offenders, and preventing CSE.

We have published eight 'Key messages' to date. Over the next few months we will be producing a further four editions, two of which in particular will draw on findings from these studies:

- ▶ Institutional CSA, e.g. football (target audience: multi-agency teams)
- ▶ Intra-familial CSA (target audience: multi-agency teams)
- ▶ Young people involved in CSA (target audience: those working with young offenders, including youth offending teams)
- ▶ Adult perpetrators of CSA (target audience: those working with adult perpetrators).